# The Poetic Middle Armenian of *Kafas* in the *Alexander Romance*

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**Abstract**    This paper examines the use of Middle Armenian in the medieval *kafa*s (short monorhymed poems) associated with the legendary history of Alexander III of Macedon in its Armenian translation. These poems, composed in Armenian in the 13th-16th centuries, contain classical and vernacular language. Examining the interplay between the poetic requirements of meter and rhyme and the linguistic features of Middle Armenian, this paper points to cases in the *kafa*s where the choice between words and grammatical forms is dictated by poetry. This includes the use of both classical nominative plural ending -ք and the medieval (and modern) -(ն)եր, and the concurrent comprehensibility of the present and imperfect indicative both with and without the particle կու.

**Keywords**    Alexander Romance. Middle Armenian. Classical Armenian. Kafas. Xačʻatur Kečʻaṙecʻi. Grigoris Ałtʻamarcʻi. Zakʻaria Gnunecʻi.

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# 1 The Armenian *Alexander Romance*

The text known by various names including *The History of Alexander of Macedon*, and commonly called in scholarship the *Alexander Romance*, comprises a semi-historical narrative of the life of Alexander III of Macedon, including fantastical episodes such as Alexander's journey to the edges of the world and his meeting with talking trees that foretell his death. Originally a Greek text that came together by the 3rd century CE, though revisions and additions continued in Greek over subsequent centuries, an early version of it was translated into Armenian in or very soon after the 5th century (Nawotka 2017; Cowe 1996; Mancini Lombardi, Uluhogian 1998; Traina 2016). Manuscripts of the Armenian *Alexander Romance* only start to survive from the late 13thearly 14th century, and it is then that Xačʻatur Kečʻaṙecʻi (1260-1331), writing in the southern Caucasus, composed *kafa*s (short, monorhymed poems) in Armenian to accompany the narrative. In the 16th century, Grigoris Ałtʻamarcʻi (c. 1478-c. 1550) and his pupil Zakʻaria Gnunecʻi, based around Lake Van, composed additional *kafa*s.

These *kafa*s appeared alongside the prose narrative of the *Alexander Romance*, functioning as both captions to images and commentaries or additions to the main text, repeating events in the narrative or providing new details, heightening the visual or emotional impact of the scene, or reflecting morally on the actions of Alexander or other figures (Simonyan 1975, 41-134; Maranci 2003-04; MacFarlane 2019; 2020). They are interventions in the narrative: at the edges of the world, they Christianise the unfamiliar landscape through which Alexander travels. They ruminate on fate, and charge Alexander's death with a moral lesson about the futility of amassing wealth and ruling the world.

From the 16th century onwards, they also began to be copied separately, in *tałaran* manuscripts (anthologies of poetry and songs) and *žołovacu* (miscellany) collections. Some selections of *kafa*s in these manuscripts appear to be comprehensive collections of a full 'cycle' of Alexander *kafa*s taken from the *Alexander Romance*, following the narrative of Alexander's life and military campaigns, while others are shorter sets grouped around particular events or themes relating to Alexander, such as his encounter with the Persian king Darius and the turning wheel of their fates. The same *kafa* might thus appear in multiple contexts: as part of the narrative sequence in the *Alexander Romance*, and in new, short cycles of poetry in an anthology manuscript. While moving from one location to another, a *kafa* might also be altered by its traditor: words spelled differently, words replaced, lines rewritten.[1]

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[1] 'Traditor' is being used here in its folkloristic sense: a person who holds and passes on an oral or literary tradition. This is an especially useful term with the *tałaran* and

The architecture of each *kafa* is determined by its poetic form. Following the isosyllabic trend in medieval Armenian poetry, and specifically the influence of Arabic monorhymed verse (Cowe 2005), the Alexander *kafa*s typically possess one of the two following patterns of metre and monorhyme:

1.  15 syllables, split into two half-lines of 2 + 3 + 2 / 3 + 2 + 3, with the rhyme falling at the end of each full line.
2.  16 syllables, 3 + 5 per every half-line, rhyming at the end of each half-line.

This is not absolutely adhered to, with a small number of Alexander *kafa*s having 'defective' half-lines or written entirely without either of the above syllabic structures, presumably due to the usual mix of scribal innovation and error. In most cases, however, the *kafa*s follow one of the above two forms, and thus offer insights into how medieval poets used Armenian, wielding word choice to maintain the syllable count and rhyme of each half-line or line.

Specifically, the *kafa*s tell us about two different kinds of Armenian. Unlike the *Alexander Romance*, which is written in *grabar*, the Classical Armenian first written in the 5th century, the *kafa*s are written with the vernacular linguistic variations collectively known as Middle Armenian, or the various medieval dialects of Armenian, reflecting – and actively using – the speech of their medieval publics.[2] These features include the particle կու in the present and imperfect indicative, the use of եղեւ in place of the classical ետ ('gave'), the plural -(ն)եր, and numerous new loan words from languages such as Persian, Arabic and Turkish. Changes in sound and orthography are also seen, such as the name 'Alexander', commonly Աղեքսանդր/ Աղեկսանդր, written in some *kafa*s as Աղէկսանդր, the ղ replaced by տ, due to sound changes in some dialects. Yet, drawing a line between these two Armenians is not possible in the *kafa*s. Much of the language remains classical, echoing the prose narrative, and the use of Middle Armenian is inconsistent. Classical and Middle Armenian, often imagined as different literary registers in the late medieval period – the 'high' language of the church, the vernacular languages of people – meld in these poems.

Medieval poets chose their register to suit their intended audiences, or used the language that reflected their learning. The 12th-century physician Mxit'ar Herac'i used a 'rustic' Armenian to write

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*žołovacu* manuscripts, where it is unknown whether the scribe created any new variations in the *kafa*s or copied them from an exemplar.

**2**  The plurality of Middle Armenian makes a comprehensive grammar difficult. For an early attempt, see Karst 1901. The Middle Armenian to East Armenian dictionary of Łazaryan and Avetisyan (2009), which frequently notes a word's *grabar* form and/ or its origin in other languages, is an invaluable resource from a lexical perspective.

his medical treatise so that it might be more readily understood. In the same century, catholicos Nersēs Šnorhali composed numerous texts – poetry, hymns, exegesis, an epistle – in *grabar*, but wrote riddles in Middle Armenian, also drawing on Scripture, apparently for people to puzzle over while drinking and celebrating (Pifer 2021, 135-50). In the introduction to a collection of love poems preserved in a 17th-century manuscript, the anthologiser distinguishes three sections of poetry, starting with subtle eulogies by the aristocratic Xačʻatur Kečʻaṙecʻi, Grigoris Ałtʻamarcʻi and Zakʻaria Gnunecʻi – our three authors of *kafa*s about Alexander – and continuing to the plainer styles of other poets like Yovhannēs Tʻlkurancʻi, ending with the anonymous, vernacular love songs of popular oral performance (Cowe 1995, 38-41). The social setting of the Alexander *kafa*s is hard to pin down, especially when they escape *Alexander Romance* manuscripts and appear in anthologies. They originated in monastic settings, where we can imagine the *kafa*s functioning like scholia, guiding a reader or listener through the narrative. All present would be educated in Classical Armenian, while conversant in their own vernaculars. To them, did the *kafa*s evoke the more formal *grabar* of the narrative, with a lighter, familiar touch, speaking of monsters and morality in – at times – their own voices? Outside the monastery walls, their place is less clear. When they appeared in *tałaran* and *žołovacu* manuscripts, did they reflect wider circulation, verses traditional yet familiar enough to follow?

Medieval Armenian poetry, shaped by class and choices more numerous than only those given here, has another hand at the sculptor's wheel: its own demands. Its metre, its rhyme, taken up by poets and other traditors, who bent language before they broke the rules of their form. Or is it truer to say that they revelled in the rich linguistic field of their lives? There are many hundreds of Alexander *kafa*s, representing a rich corpus of Middle Armenian, part of the vibrant, productive medieval Armenian poetic tradition. More *kafa*s adorned other prose narratives, while the *hayren* form proliferated as lay poetry of love and exile. Examining the Alexander *kafa*s gives us a glimpse of how medieval Armenian poetic composition worked: how language moved in the hands (and mouths) of traditors known and unknown. It leaves us wondering how this poetry sounded to its audiences. How did it affect them?

## 2 Poetic Language in the Alexander *Kafa*s

### 2.1 A Note on Manuscripts

This study makes use of two manuscripts containing the full Armenian *Alexander Romance* including *kafa*s. The first is the late 13th-, early 14th-century manuscript V424, available via facsimile (Traina et al. 2003), which contains the *kafa*s authored by Xačʻatur Kečʻaṙecʻi, absent sizeable lacunae. It is not an autograph copy. The second is the 16th-century manuscript MCR3, digitised and available to access online, an autograph copy of Zakʻaria Gnunecʻi.[3] Three anthology manuscripts, containing different short collections of Alexander *kafa*s, are additionally used: the 16th-century *žołovacu* manuscript M3668, and the 17th-century *tałaran* manuscripts M7709 and M7726, all consulted in-person at the Mesrop Maštocʻ Institute of Ancient Manuscripts.[4] Finally, the critical edition of Hasmik Simonyan (1989), based principally on a 16th-century manuscript by Zakʻaria and consulting autograph copies by Grigoris Ałtʻamarcʻi, is used.

### 2.2 Rhyming

Poetic use of Middle Armenian in the Alexander *kafa*s is primarily determined, as outlined above, by the *kafa*s' typical requirements of metre and monorhyme. This can be as straightforward as the poet preferring a version of a word that ends with the correct syllable to match the monorhyme. One likely case of the rhyme determining word choice is in the half-line of a *kafa* authored by Xačʻatur Kečʻaṙecʻi that depicts part of a dialogue between Alexander and the god Sarapis in a dream, which appears first in the manuscript V424 f. 24*r*: ընզամիս ի հուրն անշիջական ('you will fall into the unquenchable fire') – a defective half-line of nine syllables, but the rhyme -ան is present at the end of every full line. Later versions of the *kafa* shorten the final word (in manuscript M3668 f. 156*r-v* and Simonyan 1989, 134).

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| | |
|---|---|
| Ծանիր զարարիչն աստուած | Know the creator God |
| Որ երետ քեզ միտք բանական | who gave you a rational mind, |
| Թէ չէ ի յաւուր դատման | for otherwise, at the day of judgement, |
| Ընկրենիս ի հուրն անշիջան: | you will fall into the unquenchable fire. |

In both cases, the use of անշիջական and անշիջան in place of the much more common classical անշէջ ('unquenchable') supports the -ան rhyme, while utilising the transparently adjectival -ական and -ան endings. The number of syllables in անշիջան specifically keeps the half-line at eight syllables, as per the metrical pattern of the *kafa*. Multiple considerations determine the poet's choice of word. Among them is the need to fit the *kafa*'s monorhyme, and preferably its syllabic requirements, too.

Similar considerations – of rhyme and metre – shape other *kafa*s through choices such as which plural ending to use.

## 2.3 -(ն)եր Plural Ending

Many *kafa*s maintain the classical nominative plural ending -ք, but the plural -(ն)եր – used already in medieval Armenian, and standard in Western and Eastern dialects of modern Armenian – appears in some.[5] Here, describing a group of unfamiliar people among the mirabilia at the edges of the world, a *kafa* authored by Xačʻatur Kečʻaṙecʻi and found in the manuscript V424 includes the plural -ներ after two half-lines rhyming in -կեր (and the remainder of the *kafa* rhymes in -բեր).

**V424 f. 92v**

| | |
|---|---|
| Այս են մարդիկն ձկնակեր, | These are the fish-eating people, |
| որ արածին իբրև խոտակեր, | who graze like herbivorous animals |
| զոր ըմբռնեն ի նաւներ,[6] | on what they have seized in boats. |
| խաւսին լեզուաքն խուժբեր, | They speak with wild tongues, |
| հրաշս պատմեն զարմանաբեր, | they tell marvels and wonders, |
| յոլովակի ու անքննաբեր, | many and unfathomable, |

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**5**   -ք and -(ն)եր were not the only plural forms in written use during the medieval period: notably, the Cilician dialect saw the development of -նի. Thus far, I have not observed the plural -նի in the Alexander *kafa*s.

**6**   նաւկներ is un-classical not only for its plural, but the apparent dropping of an internal vowel from the classical form նաւակ ('boat') – նաւակներ would be expected. It is noteworthy that in the adjacent prose narrative of the *Alexander Romance*, the boats are also written with the plural -ներ, but here նաւակներ(ն) appears in full (Simonyan 1989, 282). Such medieval grammar in the prose is extremely uncommon, presumably an artefact of medieval transmission.

| | |
|---|---|
| [զդրս] հիանայր յոյժ հրաշաբեր, | extremely astonishing, so that he was astounded, |
| արքայս հզաւր և հմտաբեր: | this powerful and learned king. |

Other *kafa*s by Xačʻatur Kečʻaṙecʻi in the same section of the narrative are replete with the classical plural -ք, most notably the following long *kafa* listing a myriad of wild and hybrid creatures that approach Alexander's army in the night.

**V424 f. 94*v***

| | |
|---|---|
| Այս են գազանք որ յանդառին, | These are the creatures that are in the forest, |
| ըռ[նկ]եղջիւր չորքոտանին: | a four-footed rhinoceros, |
| առիւծ չափով են զուարակին | lions the size of a bull, |
| դէմք այլադէմք չար գազրա[լ]ին | [their] appearances distorted, evil, ugly, |
| վարազ վարեալք յաղմուկ կռուին, | boars driven to the tumult [where] they fight, |
| ինձք և ուսամբ փասակարին, | leopards with the back of an injurious one, |
| կարճահագի վագերք վառգին, | scorpioid tigers [trampled], |
| փեղք եզնախոյք զ[ու]ա[րա]կանին: | elephants, ox-rams, bulls, |
| Արբք վեցոտնայք և փոկոտին | six-footed and web-footed ones |
| և շնակաքաւք կերպարանին⁷ | and those with the appearance of dog-partridges. |

A subsequent *kafa* uses -ք in Հալքս for 'these winged creatures' (V424 f. 96*r*). The *kafa* about the fish-eating people stands out among the others in this part of the manuscript, and the place of նաւկներ ('boats') in the line suggests the use of its medieval plural to satisfy the -եր rhyme at the end of every half-line.

Elsewhere in V424, the two plural forms appear on the same page. Alexander and his army encounter trees that produce a sap-like Persian resin and perfume, but their attempt to fell the trees and collect the sap is met with invisible voices instructing the men to stop cutting the trees, or else suffer death. Two *kafa*s adorn the prose (V424 f. 82*r*). The first opens with a half-line using the classical -ք plural: Այս ծառքս ի ջուր աճողական ('These trees growing at the water'). The second *kafa* uses the medieval plural -եր.

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**7** The *kafa* continues for four more half-lines. The word վառգին (or any word based on վառգ-) resists discovery in dictionaries. Corruption is likely, perhaps of կոխին ('are trampled/crushed') or կոտորին ('are destroyed/routed'). The եզնախոյ(ք) are known only from the *Alexander Romance*, an animal derived from the words for 'ox' (եզն) and 'ram' (խոյ).

Ծառերն այլ ի դէմ դարձան,      The trees turned to face him,
խաւսեցան ծայնիւ բանական.      they spoke with a rational voice.

Here there is no obvious reason either plural must be used, other than that both half-lines fit the *kafa*s' respective syllabic requirements (half-lines of eight syllables each in the first *kafa*, alternating half-lines of seven and eight syllables in the second), but the poet had many tools at his disposal to write the appropriate number of syllables. This was what he chose. On the other side of the same folio, we again see 'birds' in the plural -ք (հաւք, V424 f. 82*v*). The poet – here, Xač'atur Keč'aṙec'i – comfortably uses the classical plural of his monastic teaching, but uses the vernacular plural where it suits his verse. There is no rigid delineation between the two forms. Rhyme and metre shape Xač'atur's composition.

## 2.4     Use of կու with Indicative Verbs

The particle կու, which emerged in Middle Armenian as part of the present and imperfect indicative, appears irregularly in the *kafa*s accompanying the *Alexander Romance*: included in some, not in others. Its use in the *kafa*s points to the practical reality that their authors and audiences understood the verbs whether or not they included կու. No other change is needed to the verb at this time – ասեմ ('I say') becomes կու ասեմ, with only the addition of the կու – and this made these verbs ripe for poetic use in isosyllabic lines. The inclusion or exclusion of կու becomes determined by the need to fit the seven or eight syllables required in *kafa*s.

This is seen within individual *kafa*s and across multiple variants of the same poem. For instance, a *kafa* about prophetic talking trees at the edges of the world, presented in the edition of Simonyan (1989, 296), includes կու for only one of the two verbs in the present indicative. The *kafa* is not found in the manuscripts V424 or MCR3, making its authorship likely attributable to Grigoris Ałt'amarc'i.

Եւ քո հրամանացդ ահեղ      And your formidable commands
ամենայն եղեալք հնազանդին.      all beings obey.
Անշունչ 'ւ անոգի ծառերս      Inanimate and spiritless trees
բանական ծայնիւ կու խաւսին:      speak with a rational voice.

Both half-lines follow the eight-syllable requirement of the *kafa*. The longer length of հնազանդին ('they obey'), alongside the other words in the half-line, leaves no spare syllables, while the shorter length of խաւսին ('they speak') requires an additional syllable, filled by կու.

Earlier in the narrative, when Alexander and his army encounter birds with human faces at the furthest part of the world, the same verb appears without կու in the manuscript MCR3 f. 108*r*, copied by Zakʻaria Gnunecʻi: Հաւքըս խաւսին մարդկան երգօք ('These birds speak in the languages of men'). The version of this half-line in Simonyan (1989, 263) has an irregular spelling for either the present or imperfect indicative, but still lacks կու, to preserve the syllabic count: Հաւքս այս խաւսէն մարդկան երգաւք ('These birds speak/spoke with the languages of men').

Even more tellingly, uses of կու vary in versions of the same *kafa*. In one, versifying a talking bird that foretells Alexander's death, one half-line of the bird's speech contains slight differences in wording – the addition of the word թագաւորը ('king') – that necessitates changes to the rest of the half-line in order to retain the eight-syllable metre. One of these changes is to the verb, unchanged in meaning. The first version appears in the 16th-century *Alexander Romance* manuscript MCR3, and the second in the 17th-century *tałaran* manuscript M7726. No version of this *kafa* appears in the edition of Simonyan, nor in the manuscript V424. This makes the author of the MCR3 variant potentially Zakʻaria Gnunecʻi.

| **MCR3 f. 146*r*** | **M7726 f. 38*r*** |
|---|---|
| ասաց ըշտապիր շուտով | ասաց մի ամ ել շտապով |
| ու քեզ տես ահա կու ասեմ, | ահա քեզ ասեմ թագաւոր |
| ի ծանօթ յերկիր գնայ | ի ծանօթ երկիր գրնայ |
| զի զքո մահն ես ծածկել ոչ եմ: | զի քո մահդ ես ծածկելոյ չեմ: |
| | |
| It said, "Make haste | It said, "It will be one quick year. |
| and behold what I tell you, | Behold – I tell you, king, |
| go to a known land | go to a known land |
| for I will not conceal your death" | for I will not conceal your death" |

The verbs կու ասեմ and ասեմ ('I say/tell') retain their grammatical function across the two variants, but the կու is dropped in the M7726 *kafa*, where the addition of the word թագաւոր ('king') takes up three of the half-line's eight syllables. In the hands of the M7726 *kafa*'s traditor, կու is not essential to the line's meaning. Nor, it seems, is retaining the monorhyme a priority.[8] Copied – and perhaps revised – in

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[8]  While the majority of the Alexander *kafa*s in M7726 adhere to the usual monorhymes at the end of every line or half-line, a little over a quarter do not. Most are closer than the utterly non-rhyming -որ and -եմ of this example (such as -ի and -ին, -է and -էս, where the vowel rhymes but one half-line sees the additional of a final consonant), but it is nonetheless suggestive of the traditor's own poetic sensibility.

the century after Zakʻaria's composition, this *kafa* becomes more classical in its second half-line, while the verb in the fourth half-line reads more modern. What was the effect of such a composition – a literary archaisation, a congruous anachronism?

The mutability of կու is seen again in variants of a different *kafa*, deploring the man who fatally poisons Alexander. The variant authored by Xačʻatur Kečʻaṙecʻi in V424 f. 120 is metrically poor, not at all abiding by the standard syllabic patterns of the *kafa*s, and the half-line includes կու in its verb formation: Էր կու խոցես հանզ ողորմ և խիստ լալի ('why did you wound him so pitiably and severely deplorably?'). Appearing in MCR3 f. 159*r*, copied and perhaps amended by Zakʻaria Gnunecʻi, the կու has disappeared, along with several other words inessential to the line's general meaning, and the half-line fits within the whole line's 15-syllable constraint:

| | |
|---|---|
| զայտ աշխարհակալ պարոնդ, | This, your world-conquering lord, |
| էր խոցես ողորմ ու լալի | why did you wound him pitiably and lamentably? |

Another variant of this *kafa* is presented in the edition of Simonyan (1989, 346). It uses a different verb, but notably the removal of Էր ('why') allows the inclusion of կու:

| | |
|---|---|
| Զայդ աշխարհակալ պարոնդ | This, your world-conquering lord, |
| կու դեղես ողորմ ու լալի. | you poison pitiably and deplorably. |

These *kafa*s demonstrate the ease with which traditors fit կու within the syllabic structure of medieval Armenian poetry. It is clear that its inclusion came naturally – such as in the overly long half-line of Xačʻatur Kečʻaṙecʻi in V424 f. 120, above – but its exclusion, frequent in the *kafa*s, did not hinder their meaning, making it a convenient syllable to add or remove as the line required, even the same line as traditors changed it across different variants of the same *kafa*.[9] The impression in the corpus is of all three original authors – Xačʻatur Kečʻaṙecʻi, Grigoris Ałtʻamarcʻi and Zakʻaria Gnunecʻi – using կու in

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[9] *Kafa*s with and without կու abound throughout this corpus, including other examples of differing use across variants of the same *kafa*. Another example is in a *kafa* about the poor fate of Darius. In the edition of Simonyan (1989, 151) and manuscript M3668 f. 157*v*, the relevant two half-lines read: Աշխարհս ի դուլապ նրման, | որ ի վեր 'ւ ի վար թաւալէ: ('This world is like a water-wheel, which rolls up and down'). There is no կու. In a variant of this *kafa* in M7709 f. 209*r*, these half-lines change: յաշխարհս է քամու նման | որ ի վեր ի վայր կու հոս[է] ('This world is like wind, which flows up and down'). Though the meaning – an evocation of Fortune's wheel – is sustained across both variants, the verb changes, and the shorter հոսէ leaves the half-line lacking an eighth syllable. This is filled by կու.

this way. Though the example given here from M7726 loses its կու, the manuscript's traditor preserves կու in six other *kafas*, including one where կու does not appear in the other known variants.[10] Fidelity to either the Classical absence of կու or its Middle Armenian use did not determine its place in every line. The poetry of it did.

## 2.5 Giving a Reply

Many *kafa*s describe the epistolary dialogues of Alexander and other figures in the narrative, using set phrasing for 'giving a reply': frequently, պատասխան երետ ('gave a reply') or պատասխան կու տայ ('gives a reply'), both Middle Armenian forms. Examples in the manuscript V424 show both:

**V424 f. 86*r***

| Ծառայս պատասխան երետ | This servant gave a reply |
| պայրոսի ու ասաց մեծ արքայ | to Poros, and he said, "Great king…" |

**V424 f. 118*r***

| Արքայն պատասխան կու տայ, | The king gives a reply, |
| թէ հոգիս ելաւ դու լռէ, | "My soul is perturbed, be silent!" |

This variety is typical across the various manuscripts. Both verbal forms have the same number of syllables, so the poet's choice of one over the other is not metrical. Nor is grammatical tense of much significance in the *kafa*s, especially when introducing dialogue – one variant of the second *kafa* above, found in the 17th-century *taɫaran* manuscript M7709 f. 191*r*, changes both the verb and the tense without affecting the overall meaning of the half-line: Արքայն պատասխան արար ('The king made a reply'). In many cases, due to the half-line's position in the first half of the 15-syllable full line, rhyme is also not the poet's concern.

In one *kafa*, set in the battle between Alexander and the Indian king Poros (Simonyan 1989, 274), the half-line ending երետ is followed by another ending եկիր ('you came'). Here, they form a satisfying pair, both two syllables and beginning with the same sound.

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**10**  Two half-lines of a *kafa* in M7726 f. 39*r* read: Հանց ես Աղեկսանդր եղայ | կու զբնամ ի հող ի զբնստան: ('So I, Alexander, go into the earth, to a prison'). In MCR3 f. 161*v*, the second half-line is in the aorist – where կու would not be expected – and the third-person: ու զբնաց ի նեղ զերեզման: ('and went into a narrow grave'), similar in its tense and meaning to the variant in M7709 f. 194*r*: որ մտաւ ի նեղ զերեզման: ('entered a narrow grave'). Either M7726's scribe amended the *kafa* to present tense with կու, or copied an elsewhere unattested variant.

| | |
|---|---|
| Պովրոս պատասխան երետ | Poros gave a reply, |
| Շտապով դու բոլորով եկիր | "You all came urgently" |

The interchangeability of երետ and կու տայ in the *kafa*s generally seems to signify only the poet's choice in the moment, but these half-lines attend to the aesthetic experience of poetry: the pleasure of sound.[11] There is much for the audience to appreciate in the *kafa*s.

## 3 Conclusion

In mediating between the late antique *Alexander Romance*, translated and preserved in its early *grabar*, and the medieval and early modern worlds of the *vardapet*s and unknown traditors who copied the surviving manuscripts of Alexander's legendary life and anthologised its poetry, the *kafa*s speak in a malleable Armenian. They feature the particle կու, used or omitted as the metre required, understood either way, and place the plural -(ն)եր and less common variants of words where the monorhyme demanded. The natural variability of changing verbal and pluralisation systems permits this poetic exploitation. Not only does it speak to the ability of poets and publics to understand poetry that crossed and incorporated several registers of language, it points to why they might want to: poetic sensibility. The poets' chosen form made metrical demands and used a monorhyme that most – though not all – traditors cared to adhere to. This paper has noted, where possible, the author and origin of each *kafa*, which indicates that each traditor partook in these pleasures, depending on their personal composition, copying and compilation (M7726, interestingly, reveals its traditor's less rigid interest in rhyme). Each half-line is a facet of the use and development of Middle Armenian. Specifically, it is part of the experience of encountering Alexander in medieval Armenian literature: put into poetry that emerges from

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**11** A less typical variant of the 'giving a reply' half-line comes in a *kafa* where the exchange, not epistolary, is between a narrator in first-person and the dead Alexander: դարձաւ պատասխան երետ ('He gave a reply back'), in manuscript MCR3 f. 162*r*. The verb երետ is familiar from the above examples, but the half-line adds դարձաւ. A variant of this half-line, in the edition of Simonyan (1989, 355), changes the formula further: Դարձաւ որ ջուապ ետուր. Here, the familiar word պատասխան ('reply') has been replaced with the variously spelled loan-word ջուապ (ճուղապ in Łazaryan, Avetisyan 2009, 478), which has the same meaning but one fewer syllable, required by the addition of որ. Alternatively, if the causality is reversed, որ (or another one-syllable word) is required by the traditor's choice to use ջուապ. The second verb in this variant is also unusual: ետուր is typically the second-person ('you gave'), but this does not match the *kafa*'s first half-line, in which the narrator in first-person asks their question 'of him', that is, Alexander. Lack of cohesion is, of course, a possibility, as is scribal error.

the artful voices of Keč'aṙis, Lake Van and many other points on an itinerary of transmission, at once classical and vernacular. How their publics heard these *kafa*s – a lighter tread through a traditional language, an anachronistic voice in contemporary verse – remains harder to pin down, freed from these pages in lost pedagogies and performances.

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